

Joel 2:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But I will remove far off from you the northern army, and will drive him into a land barren and desolate, with his face toward the east sea, and his hinder part toward the utmost sea, and his stink shall come up, and his ill savour shall come up, because he hath done great things.

Analysis

But I will remove far off from you the northern army (Hebrew *ve'et-hatsephone archiq me'aleikhem*)—God promises to drive away "the northern one." While this immediately refers to the locust swarm (which often came from the north), it prophetically points to future military invasions. Babylon, Assyria, and other enemies attacked Israel from the north (Jeremiah 1:14-15, 4:6, 6:1, Ezekiel 38:6, 15). The phrase encompasses both literal locusts and symbolic enemies—God will remove all threats to His people's security and prosperity.

And will drive him into a land barren and desolate—the invading force will be driven into erets tsiyah ushmamah (הָרֶץ תְּשִׁמְמָה, *אָקֵץ צָהָב*, a dry and desolate land). The irony is striking: the army that made Israel's land desolate will itself be driven into desolation. This demonstrates the *lex talionis* principle—measure-for-measure justice. "With his face toward the east sea, and his hinder part toward the utmost sea" describes the army being scattered east (Dead Sea) and west (Mediterranean Sea)—total dispersion and destruction.

And his stink shall come up, and his ill savour shall come up—the Hebrew *ba'osh* (בָּאֹשׁ, stench) and *tseahanato* (צְהַנָּתוֹן, foul smell) describe rotting corpses. Millions of dead locusts would create unbearable stench. This imagery also applies

to defeated armies whose unburied corpses pollute the land (Isaiah 34:3, Ezekiel 39:11-16). The final phrase **because he hath done great things** (Hebrew *ki higdil la'asot*) is deliberately ambiguous—it could mean the enemy "did great [evil] things" deserving judgment, or ironically that God used them to accomplish His purposes. Either way, once God's tool of judgment completes its work, He discards and destroys it.

Historical Context

The "northern army" had both immediate and prophetic significance. Locust swarms often approached Palestine from the Arabian desert to the south and east but could come from any direction. However, all major military threats to Israel came from the north—the Mesopotamian powers (Assyria, Babylon) and later Syria. Prophets consistently warned of judgment from the north (Jeremiah 1:13-15, 4:6, 6:1, 6:22). Joel's language encompasses the immediate locust plague while foreshadowing future invasions, ultimately pointing to eschatological deliverance when God destroys all enemies of His people (Ezekiel 38-39, Zechariah 14, Revelation 19-20).

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does God's removal of the northern army demonstrate that He controls even the instruments of His judgment?
2. What does the measure-for-measure judgment (invaders driven into desolation) teach about God's justice?

3. How should believers trust God's promise to ultimately remove all threats and enemies, even when current circumstances appear overwhelming?

Interlinear Text

וְאַתָּה	בַּאֲפֻנוֹן	אֶרְחֶם	מַעֲלִיכָּם
H853	from you the northern	But I will remove far off	H5921
	H6830	H7368	
וְהַרְחַפְתִּי	אֵל	אֶל	פָּנָתִי
army and will drive	H413	him into a land	with his face
H5080		H776	H6440
אֵל	אֶל	בְּקָדְמָן	בְּאַחֲרָן
H413	sea	toward the east	toward the utmost
H3220	H6931	H5490	H314
וְאַתָּה	בְּאַשׁ	וְאַתָּה	בְּאַשׁ
shall come up	and his stink	shall come up	and his ill savour
H5927	H889	H5927	H6709
וְאַתָּה	צְחִנָּת	וְאַתָּה	גָּדוֹלָה
and	and	and	great things
			H1431
לְעֵשֶׂות:			
because he hath done			
H6213			

Additional Cross-References

Zechariah 14:8 (Parallel theme): And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be.

Isaiah 34:3 (Parallel theme): Their slain also shall be cast out, and their stink shall come up out of their carcases, and the mountains shall be melted with their blood.

Deuteronomy 11:24 (Parallel theme): Every place whereon the soles of your feet shall tread shall be your's: from the wilderness and Lebanon, from the river, the river Euphrates, even unto the uttermost sea shall your coast be.

Amos 4:10 (Parallel theme): I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses; and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD.

Exodus 10:19 (Parallel theme): And the LORD turned a mighty strong west wind, which took away the locusts, and cast them into the Red sea; there remained not one locust in all the coasts of Egypt.

Ezekiel 47:18 (Parallel theme): And the east side ye shall measure from Hauran, and from Damascus, and from Gilead, and from the land of Israel by Jordan, from the border unto the east sea. And this is the east side.